

# Bazars and markets in medieval India

**Syed Ali Nadeem Rezavi**

Associate Professor, AMU, Aligarh

---

*Since cities had markets as a necessary element of their existence, when cities were planned sites for construction of markets were also provided. This article deals with the extant archaeological evidence for such markets in the medieval cities of Delhi, Agra and Fathpur Sikri.*

---

**Keywords:** Markets, Delhi, Agra, Fathpur Sikri, archaeology

Bazars and markets are the markers which help us differentiate between an urban and a rural settlement. Throughout the ages they have played a distinctive role in the development of a town or a city. Literally, bazars signify spaces where brisk commercial activity in the form of buying and selling surplus produce or products, which are in demand in the area, takes place.

We attempt here a study of the physical space which constituted a bazar or a market in Medieval North India. The area undertaken for this study is confined to the Delhi–Agra region. This is so for two reasons: one, the Delhi–Agra region remained the core of the Medieval Sultanate as well as the Mughal Empire, and second, the archaeological and textual data also is the most for this region. Accordingly, we generally confine ourselves here to the study of the bazars in Delhi, Agra and Fathpur Sikri.

Delhi emerged as a prominent city under the Chauhans and then as capital of the Delhi Sultans from 1206 and gaining prominence once again when Shahjahan built his capital, Shāhjahānabād.<sup>1</sup> Agra first gained prominence under the Lodis, before Akbar developed it as his capital. Though it ceased to be the capital after Shahjahan, it continued to flourish as a major urban settlement down to modern times.<sup>2</sup> Fathpur Sikri, on the other hand, is supposed to be a ‘one reign wonder’. It came in existence as a result of a royal decree in 1571, remained the capital city till 1585 before sinking to political oblivion. It however continued as a

---

<sup>1</sup> B.R. Mani, *Threshold of the Orient* (Studies in Archaeological Investigations), New Delhi, 1977; R.E. Frykenberg, *Delhi Through the Ages: Essays in Urban History, Culture and Society*, Delhi, 1986; Stephen P. Blake, *Shahjahanabad: The Sovereign City in Mughal India, 1659–1739*, Cambridge, 1991; Shama Mitra Chenoy, *Shahjahanabad: A City of Delhi, 1638–1857*, New Delhi, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> G. Keene, *A Handbook for Visitors to Agra and Its Neighbourhood*, Calcutta, 1894; S.M. Latif, *Agra Historical and Descriptive*, Calcutta, 1896; S. Nurul Hasan, s.v. Agra, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, eds H.A.R. Gibb and J.H. Kramers et al., Leiden, 1960; Ebba Koch, *The Complete Taj and the Riverfront Gardens of Agra*, London, 2006.

commercial entrepôt even after the reign of Akbar, when it catered to the needs of indigo merchants and rug sellers.<sup>3</sup>

Excavations and explorations have revealed much information regarding the shops and markets in these towns, especially Tughluqabad in Delhi,<sup>4</sup> and Fathpur Sikri in Agra. Textual evidence as well as old maps also provide us much information on the markets and bazars in the towns of Agra and Shahjahanabad.

Though the history of Delhi is traced back to Indraprastha, the legendary city of the Pandavas, it is from the period of Rai Pithora III, popularly known as Prithviraj Chauhan that the antecedents of this town can historically be traced. Prithviraj founded the Qila Rai Pithora popularly known as Lal Kot in 1052 AD. It was this Qila Rai Pithora and the city around it which was conquered and subsequently added upon by Qutbuddin Aibek and Iltutmish, who constructed their palaces, mansions and the Qubbatul Islam Mosque along with bazars and markets.<sup>5</sup>

The city which started developing at this site and replaced Lalkot, was identified by subsequent fourteenth-century chronicles as *Dehli-i Kuhna* (The Old City).<sup>6</sup> The city gradually started shifting from the Aravalli ridge towards Yamuna. First during the period of Ghiyasuddin Balban, the suburb of Ghiyaspur was developed which was situated near the *khānqāh* (hospice) of Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya, and then, when Muizzuddin Kaiqubad came to the throne, according to Ziya Barani, the *qasr* (fortress) of Kilokhari was established.<sup>7</sup> It was in its vicinity that, under Jalaluddin Khalji, the *Shahr-i Nau* (The New City) developed.<sup>8</sup> Not only were the nobles and other great men encouraged to build their mansions in this area, but large bazars were also established in its environs.<sup>9</sup> The large and specialised markets, like the *Bazār-i Bazzāzān* (market of cloth merchants) and all the major commercial centres, at least till the time of Alauddin Khalji, remained in the old city, which, under the Khaljis, emerged as the *Shahr* (City) par excellence.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Attilio Petruccioli, *La Città Del Sole Delle Acque Fathpur Sikri*, Rome, Carucci, 1988; A. Petruccioli and Thomas Dix, *Fatehpur Sikri*, Berlin, 1992; Syed Ali Nadeem Rezavi, *Fathpur Sikri Revisited*, New Delhi, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Mehrdad Shokoohy and Natalie H. Shokoohy, 'The Dark Gate, the Dungeons, the Royal Escape Route and More: Survey of Tughluqabad, Second Interim Report', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 62(3), 1999, pp. 423–61.

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed history of the town, see R.E. Frykenberg (ed.), *Delhi Through the Ages Essays in Urban History, Culture and Society*, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> Sharafuddin Ali Yazdi, *Zafarnama*, Calcutta, 1888, vol. II, p. 125.

<sup>7</sup> Ziya Barani, *Tarikh-i Firuzshahi*, ed. Syed Ahmad, Calcutta, 1860–62, pp. 175, 343–44; Shaikh Nasiruddin, *Khairul Majalis*, ed. K.A. Nizami, p. 126; also see M. Athar Ali, 'Capital of the Sultans of Delhi during the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries', in his *Mughal India Studies in Polity, Ideas, Society, and Culture*, Delhi, 2006, pp. 37–48.

<sup>8</sup> Barani, *Tarikh-i Firuzshahi*, p. 175.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Minhaj Siraj, *Tabaqāt-i Nāsirī*, ed. Abdul Hai Habibi, 2nd ed., vol. I, Kabul, 1963, p. 400; and Amir Hasan Sijzi, *Fawa'id al-Fu'ad*, tr., Ziyaul Hasan Faruqi, New Delhi, 1996, pp. 342–43.

During this period Delhi developed not only as the capital city, but also as a viable commercial centre. Comprising a number of *sarāis* and inns, it attracted a large number of merchants and traders towards it. Thus there were general markets for things of common use and specialised markets for foodgrains, cloth, horses, as well as slaves of all nationalities. These congested markets, we are told, were dominated by brokers (*dalāls*).<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately not much information is available on the layout and plan of these *bāzārs* and markets of the early medieval period.

Some information about the bazars during the Sultanate period, especially in the region of Delhi, however, becomes available from the Tughluq period onwards. Between 1320 and 1325 Ghiyasuddin Tughluq built the city of Tughluqabad, which, after the death of Muhammad Tughluq in 1351, ceased to be the capital city.<sup>12</sup>

Spread over some 300 acres and located on a hill surrounded by a low-lying area, Tughluqabad appears to have been inspired by the Khurasanian model of towns, such as Bust, Nishapur and Tus. Like them, the whole city was divided into three distinct areas, namely, the main or the lower town (the *shahristān* or the *pā'in shahr*), the upper town (*bālā ḥiṣār*) and the citadel (*arg'qaṣr*).

Explorations and excavations by the Mehrdad and Natalie H. Shokoohy have revealed that the markets at Tughluqabad were located in the main town, the general layout of which is in the form of a trapezium or a quadrilateral with two main roads emanating from the citadel and culminating at the city ramparts. Shops and markets were generally aligned along these arterial roads.

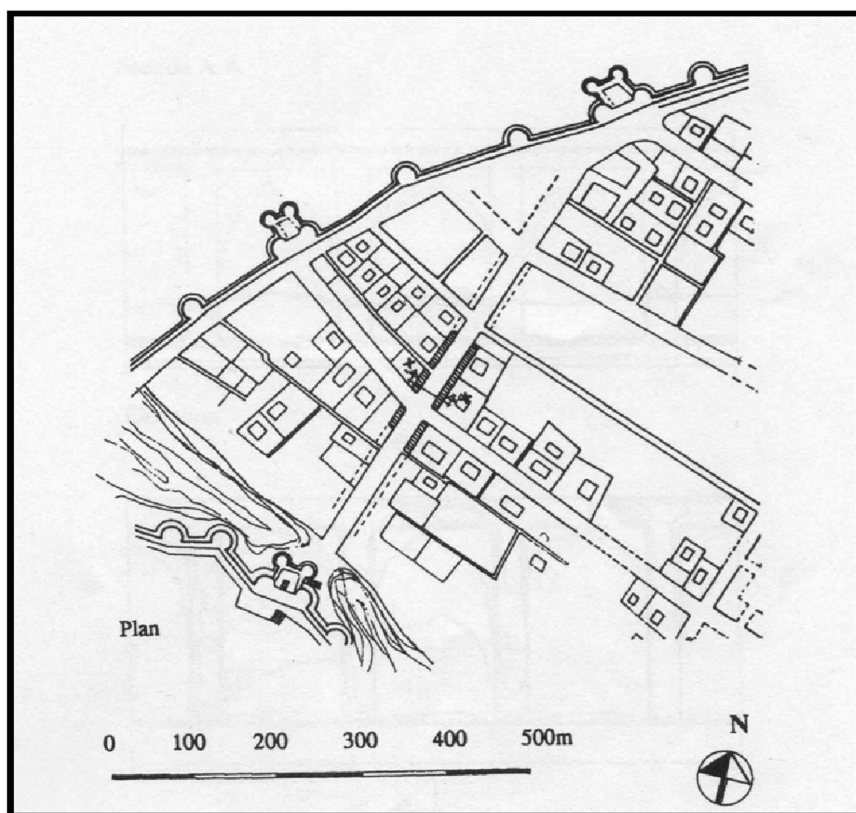
The long and straight 20 m-wide market street aligned along a North–South axis, starting from the northern gate of the citadel and culminating at a city gate in the north (popularly known as ‘Dhoban Dhobani Gate’), was marked by a row of shops on each side. This bazar, in local parlance of the nineteenth century, was known as the Khas Bazar. At its ending towards the city gate, this road is preceded by a triangular area, which according to the Shokoohys may have been an open market-place where local farmers may have brought their daily produce for sale (Figure 1[a]).

A number of shops have been revealed through excavations. Just as we would see in the case of Fathpur Sikri, the shops were built on top of a platform (0.65 m high) and are fronted with a one metre wide verandah. Being equal in size, each shop was about 3 m wide and 5 m deep. Probably the platform running in front of the shop was used to display the goods, while the shop itself was used to store the products. The buyer would generally stand on the street below to buy what was being sold (Figure 1[b]).

<sup>11</sup> See Mohammad Habib, ‘Introduction to Elliot and Dawson’s History of India, vol. II’, in K.A. Nizami (ed.), *Politics and Society during the Early Medieval Period: Collected Works of Professor Mohammad Habib*, vol. I, New Delhi, 1974, pp. 80–81, 83.

<sup>12</sup> Iṣāmī, *Futūḥ us Salāṭīn*, A.S. Usha (ed.), Madras, 1948, p. 412; Barani, p. 442; for a modern work on Tughluqabad, see Mehrdad Shokoohy and Natalie H. Shokoohy, *Tughluqabad: A Paradigm for Indo-Islamic Urban Planning and Its Architectural Components*, London, 2007.

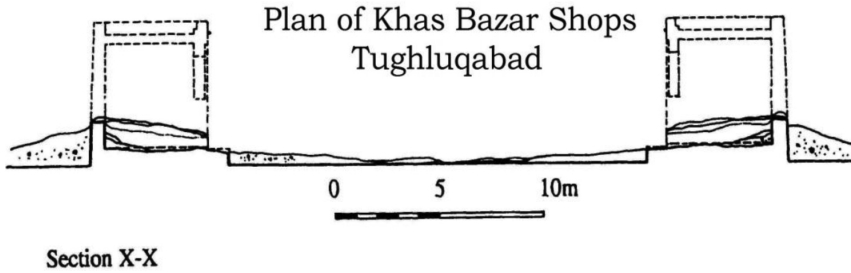
**Figure 1(a)**  
Khas Bazar, Tughluqabad



**Source:** Adapted from Mehrdad and Natalie H. Shokoohy.

Although at the Khas Bazar the shops only survived up till the plinth level, they provide the earliest examples of a typical bazar in the medieval Indian milieu. The traces of arches which survive in the back and front walls also help us establish that the tradition of building shops remained almost the same from at least the fourteenth century down to the eighteenth and nineteenth century in north India.

Just outside the East Gate of the citadel, along a shorter road aligned in an east–west direction, was a *chowk* (square) which was once surrounded by shops and other public structures. This open square was once again inspired by Iranian traditions and was followed in many Sultanate towns like Nagaur, Bidar and Ahmadabad.

**Figure 1(b)**

**Source:** Adapted from Mehrdad and Natalie H. Shokoohy.

Another road from the north of this *chowk* led to the end of the walled city. Running parallel to the *Khas Bazar*, it was provided with two market squares located in the middle of the town. These *chowks* were probably grain markets (*mandi*).

Similar shopping complexes were revealed during the excavations of the fifteenth-century Champaner in Gujarat. Excavations revealed a row of at least 11 shops built atop a raised platform with a 'sufficient space provided in front' of each shop for the convenience of buyers. An additional feature encountered in this complex was that each shop was provided with a storehouse and a residence at the back.<sup>13</sup>

Much more detailed information is available on the shops and *bāzārs* of the Agra–Delhi region from the period of Akbar's reign onwards. We also have contemporary testimony that the residences of the traders and shopkeepers were generally either located on top of their shops or behind them.<sup>14</sup>

During this period, the Timurid tradition of locating the markets between the *shahristān* (the town area with the palace and bureaucratic establishments) and the *rabāz* (suburbs comprising the houses of the general masses)<sup>15</sup> reflecting a close symbiotic relationship between the elite and mercantile classes, was closely followed. Thus at Agra, Fathpur Sikri and Shahjahanabad, the markets were located in the areas which not only surrounded the imperial areas but which were connected to, and accessible from the fort and palaces, as well as the areas where the civic population resided.

<sup>13</sup> V.H. Sonawane, 'Excavations at Champaner: A First World Heritage Site of Gujarat', *Puratattva*, no. 39, 2009, pp. 68–79.

<sup>14</sup> Francois Bernier, *Travels in India*, tr. A. Constable, London, 1891, pp. 245–46.

<sup>15</sup> W. Barthold, *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion*, Philadelphia, 1977, pp. 78, 83–92.

This feature appears to have also been closely followed while setting up temporary camps, which had, in the first place, inspired the Mughal town plans. Explaining the Mughal Encampment, and after discussing the royal tents and enclosures in it, Abu'l Fazl writes:

Behind the tents (of Princes), at some distance, the *buyūtāt* (*kārkhānas*) are placed; and at a further distance of 30 yards behind them, *at the four corners of the camp, the bazars*. The nobles are encamped on all the sides, according to their rank outside the complex for imperial use.<sup>16</sup>

From an old map of Agra, dating back to 1720s, it appears that the city of Agra had around eight radial roads emanating from different directions and culminating at the fort. The main imperial road coming out of the northern gate of the fort (Dehli Darwaza), is depicted in this map as opening into an octagonal *bāzār* labelled as *Chahārsū* which is situated in front of the Jami Masjid and the gate of the city (labelled as 'Chahārsū Darwaza') where it ends; the whole wide road is flanked with shops on both sides. Another market is located on a road towards the south-western corner of the town.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly at Fathpur Sikri exploration has revealed at least five markets in an area connecting the imperial and bureaucratic area with the civic population.<sup>18</sup> The prominent and largest of these Akbari bazars appears to be '*bāzār-i buzurg-i sangīn*' (the 'great stone bazar') mentioned by Abu'l Fazl and other contemporaries, and said to be half-a-mile long and built of stone rubble (Figure 2).<sup>19</sup> This rectilinear market, situated between the *Dīwān-i 'Am* and the Agra Gate of the town consisted of approximately 470 shops, 235 on either side of the road. In their layout, these shops, just as in the case of Tughluqabad, tend to follow a similar plan with a 1.6 m wide platform fronting an open vestibule (1.8 m wide) raised to a height of 80 cm. This verandah or ante-chamber led into a flat-roofed rectangular shop-chamber which is 7.90 m × 3.5 m in its dimensions. As in the case of the Tughluqabad market, the platform was probably meant for the shoppers. The width of the road between the two rows of shops varied between 18.6 m (between *Kārkhāna* and the *Naqqārkhāna*) and 15.4 m (between the *Naqqārkhāna* and the Agra Darwaza). A series of 3.65 m wide cross-lanes placed at regular intervals emanated from this market and headed towards the residential areas.

<sup>16</sup> Abu'l Fazl, *Akbarnāma*, Nawal Kishore, Lucknow, 1882, vol. III, p. 118 (emphasis added).

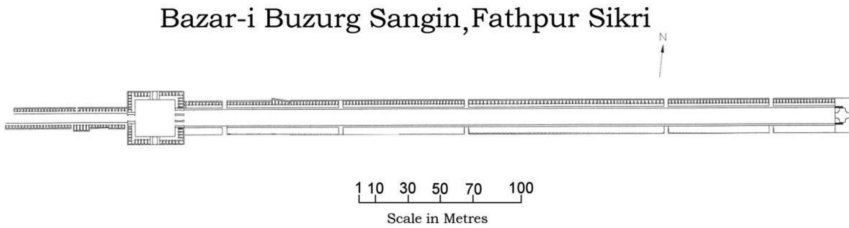
<sup>17</sup> The Map of Agra was ordered to be drawn in 1720s by Sawai Jai Singh of Amber and is preserved at the City Palace Museum at Jaipur. It was first reproduced by Susan Gole, *Indian Maps and Plans*, New Delhi, 1989, pp. 200–201. For details of the plan of Agra and its structural remains, see Salim Javed Akhtar, *Mughal City of Agra and Its Environs: An Archaeological Survey*, PhD thesis submitted to AMU in 2009.

<sup>18</sup> See S. Ali Nadeem Rezavi, *Fathpur Sikri Revisited*, op. cit.

<sup>19</sup> This market complex was excavated under a National Project jointly by ASI and Department of History in AMU. The Aligarh team was headed by Prof. R.C. Gaur.



**Figure 2**  
The Large Stone Bazar, Fathpur Sikri



**Source:** Drawn by author.

At Shahjahanabad (Delhi), the two main boulevards connecting the fort with the city gates were provided with shops and bazars. On the road running east–west and connecting the fort with the Lahore Darwaza of the town, was situated the main commercial hub of the city which was known as the Chandni Chowk. Shops also lined the second main avenue which ran in a north–south direction and connected the citadel through its Akbarabadi Gate with the Delhi Darwaza of the city in the south.<sup>20</sup>

At least by 1740s when Dargah Quli Khan visited Delhi, the Chandni Chowk Bazar was divided into three sections. The first section of the market from the Lahori Gate of the fort to the Kotwali Darwaza was called Urdu Bazar (Camp Market) which served the imperial household and the elites as well as soldiers, clerks, artisans and others who lived around the palace–fortress.<sup>21</sup> The second section was between Kotwali Chabutara and the Chandni Chowk square, known as Jauhari Bazar.<sup>22</sup> Each of these sections, was 480 yards long. The third section which was 560 yards long, due to its being situated near Fatehpur Masjid was known as the Fatehpuri Bazar.<sup>23</sup>

The second market street mentioned above, connecting the Akbarabadi Gate of the fort with the Delhi Gate of the city comprised 888 shops lining both sides of the road. Though not as impressive as the Chandni Chowk Bazar, it was still quite a thriving market.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> For a plan of Shahjahanabad and its built environment, see Stephen P. Blake, *Shahjahanabad The Sovereign City in Mughal India, 1639–1739*, op. cit.

<sup>21</sup> Sangin Beg, *Sairul Manazil*, ed., Sharif Husain Qasmi, 1982, p. 39; Saiyid Ahmad Khan, *Asar us Sanadid*, 1847, pp. 51–52; Bashiruddin Ahmad, *Waqi'at Dārul Hukūmat Dehli*, Delhi, 1919, II, pp. 210–11.

<sup>22</sup> Sangin Beg, op. cit., p. 35; Saiyid Ahmad Khan, op. cit., pp. 51–52; Bashiruddin Ahmad, op. cit., pp. 205–206.

<sup>23</sup> Saiyid Ahmad Khan, op. cit., pp. 51–52; Bashiruddin Ahmad, op. cit., pp. 205–06.

<sup>24</sup> Shahnawaz Khan, *Ma'asir ul Umara*, ed. Maulvi Ashraf Ali, Calcutta, 1891, II, p. 272; Muhammad Salih Kamboh, *Amal-i Salih*, ed. Ghulam Yazdani, Calcutta, 1939, III, p. 45.

One hears of different types of bazars during the Mughal period. Amongst them the main bazar, often known as the *Chowk*, as we have already seen, occupied an extensive, central and prominent area of the city. Manrique thus defines a *chowk* as ‘a space and open place in the centre of a town’.<sup>25</sup> Thus we have the Chandni Chowk and the Chowk Sa’adullah Khan in Shahjahanabad,<sup>26</sup> and the *Chowks* of Agra<sup>27</sup> and Lahore.<sup>28</sup>

*Nakhkhās*, on the other hand, was a daily marketplace where horses, cattle and sometimes slaves were sold.<sup>29</sup> Pelsaert noted that the *nakhkhās* of Agra used to be held every morning. Camels, horses, oxen along with tents and cotton goods were sold there.<sup>30</sup> At least at Agra, this cattle market was a covered building.<sup>31</sup>

*Ganj* and *mandī* or *mandvī* were names given to grain markets,<sup>32</sup> while an enclosed market, sometimes attached to a nobles establishment, was known as a *katra*.<sup>33</sup> Generally such structures would be walled enclosures used for storing grain.

*Penth* or *hāt* was a market held at a fixed place around the city or a village of note on fixed days—once a week or more—in which petty *banias* and local manufacturers and artisans gathered to sell their products.<sup>34</sup> In these types of weekly *hāts* all those who brought their commodities to be sold had stalls on the ground and in the open. Apart from these, there were also *muhalla* markets which catered to the needs of the neighbourhood.<sup>35</sup>

A new type of market plan made its appearance from the period of Akbar: the *Chahārsūq*. It was shaped like a cruciform. There were at least two such markets, one at Fathpur Sikri, and the other at Agra. See Figures 3 and 4.

The cross-shaped market, which appears to be the earliest such example in India is situated in Fathpur Sikri a little north of the main road of the town adjoining the Moti Bagh area and Muhalla Kotla. This structure is organised around two straight intersecting 14 m wide roads forming a regular square. In the centre, where the

<sup>25</sup> Sebastian Manrique, *Travels of F.S. Manrique, 1629–1643*, tr. C.E. Luard and H. Hosten, Hakluyt Society, 2nd series, LXI, Oxford, vol. II, 1927, p. 191.

<sup>26</sup> Thevenot, *Indian Travels of Thevenot and Careri*, ed. S. Sen, NAI, New Delhi, 1949, p. 303; William Irvine, *The Later Mughals*, ed. Jadunath Sarkar, New Delhi, 1971, vol. II, p. 257.

<sup>27</sup> Manik Chand, *Ahwāl-i Shahr Akbarabad*, Br. Lib. MS Or. 2030, f. 40a; Irvine, op. cit., I, p. 17.

<sup>28</sup> Manrique, op. cit., vol. II, p. 191.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Mundy, *The Travels of Peter Mundy in Europe and Agra 1608–1667*, ed. Sir R.C. Temple, vol. II, London, 1914, p. 189.

<sup>30</sup> Francisco Pelsaert, *Jahangir’s India or Remonstratie of Fransisco Pelsaert*, tr. W.H. Moreland & P. Geyl, Delhi, 1972, p. 4; Mundy, op. cit., vol. II, p. 189.

<sup>31</sup> Manik Chand, op. cit., f. 55a.

<sup>32</sup> See Hamida Khatoon Naqvi, *Urban Centres and Industries in Upper India, 1556–1803*, Bombay, 1968, pp. 56, 76.

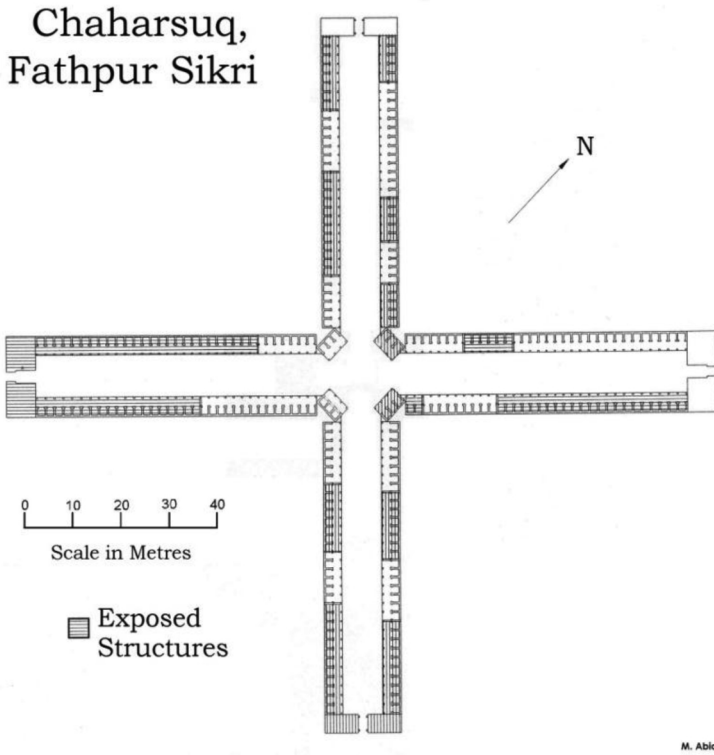
<sup>33</sup> Irvine, op. cit., vol. I, p. 126.

<sup>34</sup> For *penth*s held at Agra see Banarasi Das, *Ardhakathanak—Half a Tale*, ed. and tr. Mukund Lath, Jaipur, 1981, p. 19.

<sup>35</sup> For example, the market located south of *Rang Mahal* complex in the Old Chishti Quarters at Fathpur Sikri had 42 shops and catered to the needs of *muhalla* Shaikhpora.



**Figure 3**  
The Chahārsūq Bazar of Fathpur Sikri

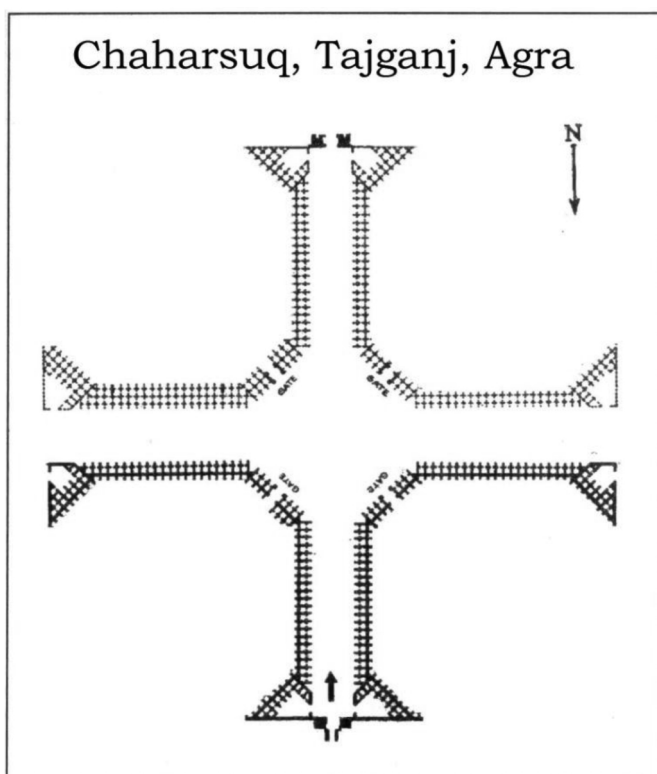


**Source:** Drawn by author.

intersecting roads cross, a square (*chowk*) is formed. Each arm of the cruciform, having a length of 100 m, contains 66 cells, 33 on each side of the road and these are fronted with verandahs. The total number of cells in this structure is 276, each of which internally measures  $2 \times 2.5$  m, while the pillared verandah is 4 m wide. Each wing of the cruciform terminates at a trabeate entrance gate.<sup>36</sup> The plan of this structure closely resembles a typical *chahārsūq bāzār* of Iran and Central Asia. The *chahārsūq bāzār* built by Shahjahan at Tajganj near the Taj Mahal in Agra was also of the same type and shape. The only difference between it and the

<sup>36</sup> Presently the structure is erroneously called as Pukhta Sarai. Atillio Petruccioli too treats the structure as a Sarai. See A. Petruccioli, *Fathpur Sikri Citta del sole e Delle Acque*, Roma, Italy, 1988, p. 53. Arif Qandhari, while describing Fathpur Sikri, mentions a *Chaharsuq bazar*.

**Figure 4**  
The Chahārsūq Bazar of Tajganj, Agra



**Source:** Drawn by author.

one at Fathpur Sikri is that here the four wings of the bazar adjoined four square enclosures which form *katras*, that is, enclosed markets, on the outer side of this *chahārsūq*.

The Covered Bazar near the Lahore Gate of the Delhi fort is an extension of the *chahārsūq* variety of the market. The only difference here was the fact that just like the typical Central Asian markets of Herat, Samarqand or Bukhara, the whole structure along with its central avenue along which the shops were placed is covered with vaults. In the centre where the four wings cross was an octagonal open space to let in air and sunlight. It is a plan which, though reminding us of Central Asian antecedents, is yet a unique example not encountered elsewhere in Indian architecture.